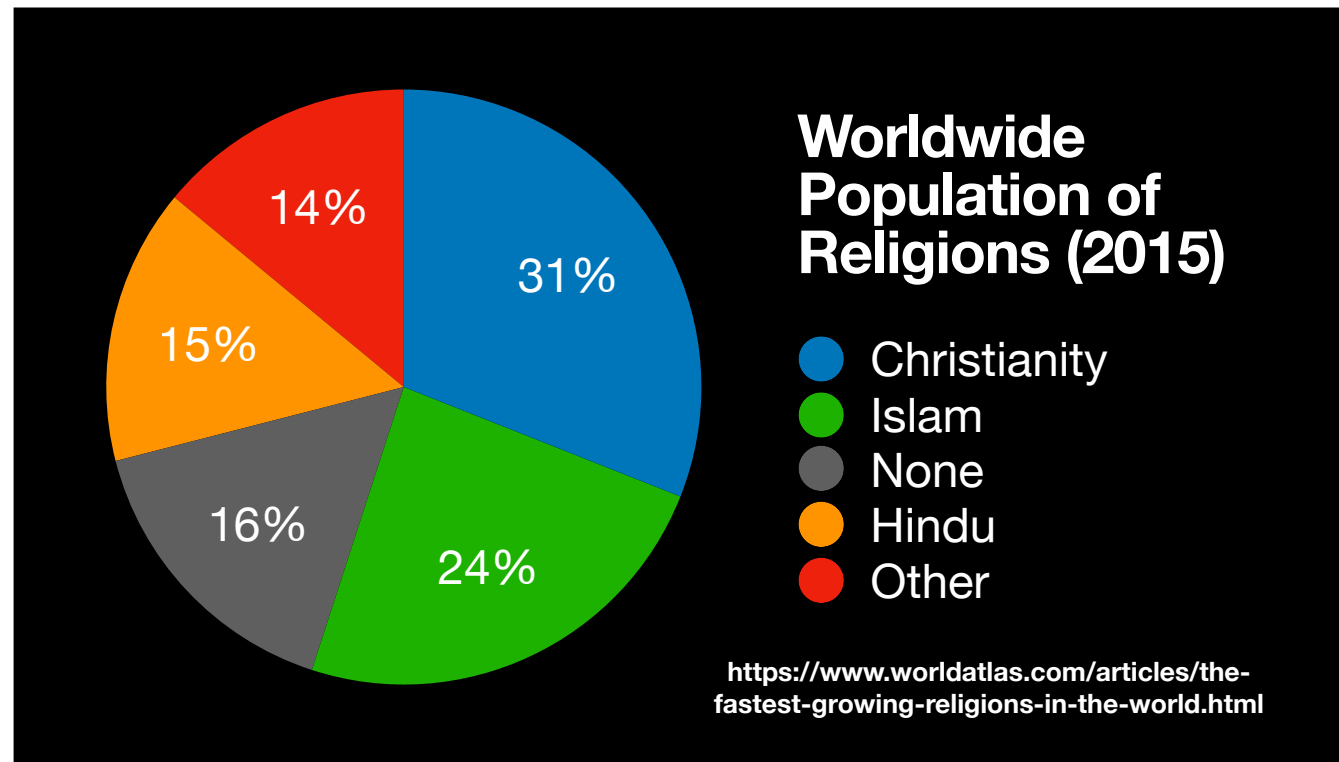




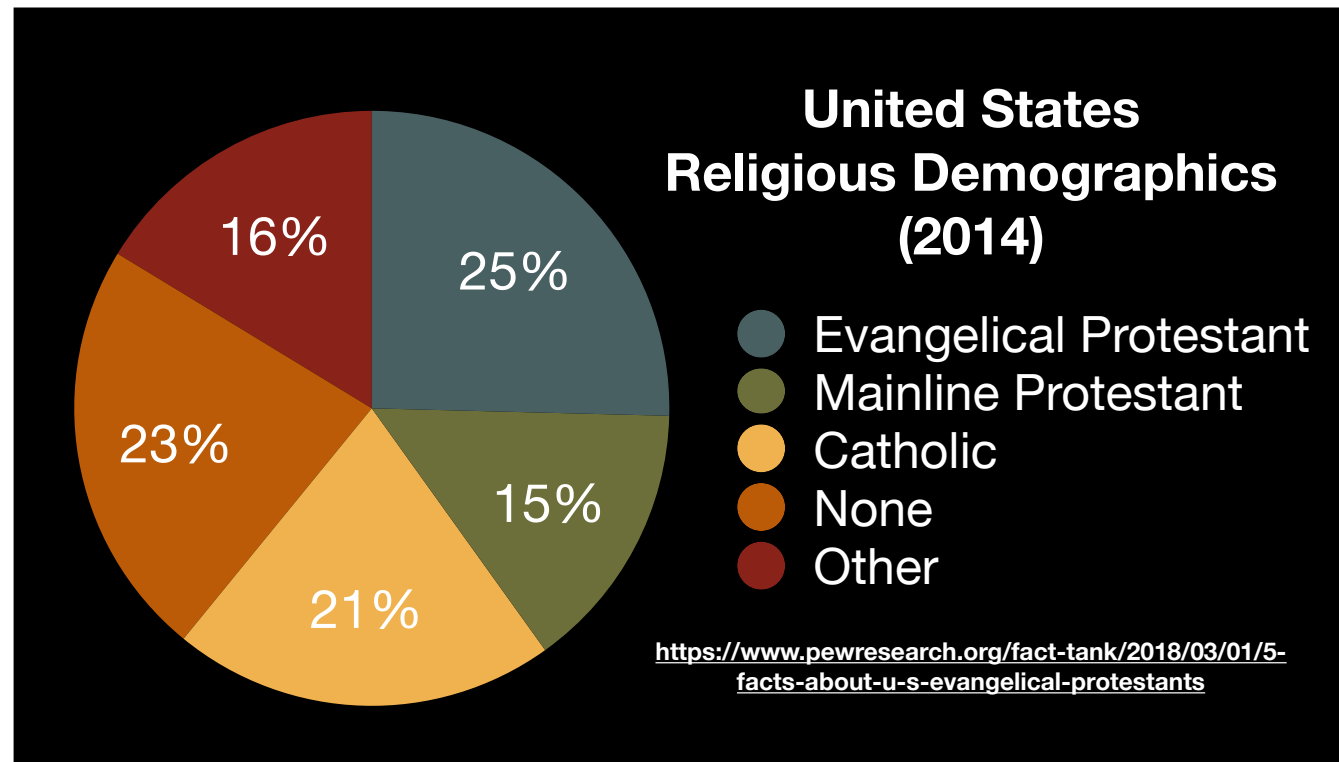
JWL

# Paul & the Pagan Philosophers

Reaching a Biblically Illiterate Culture

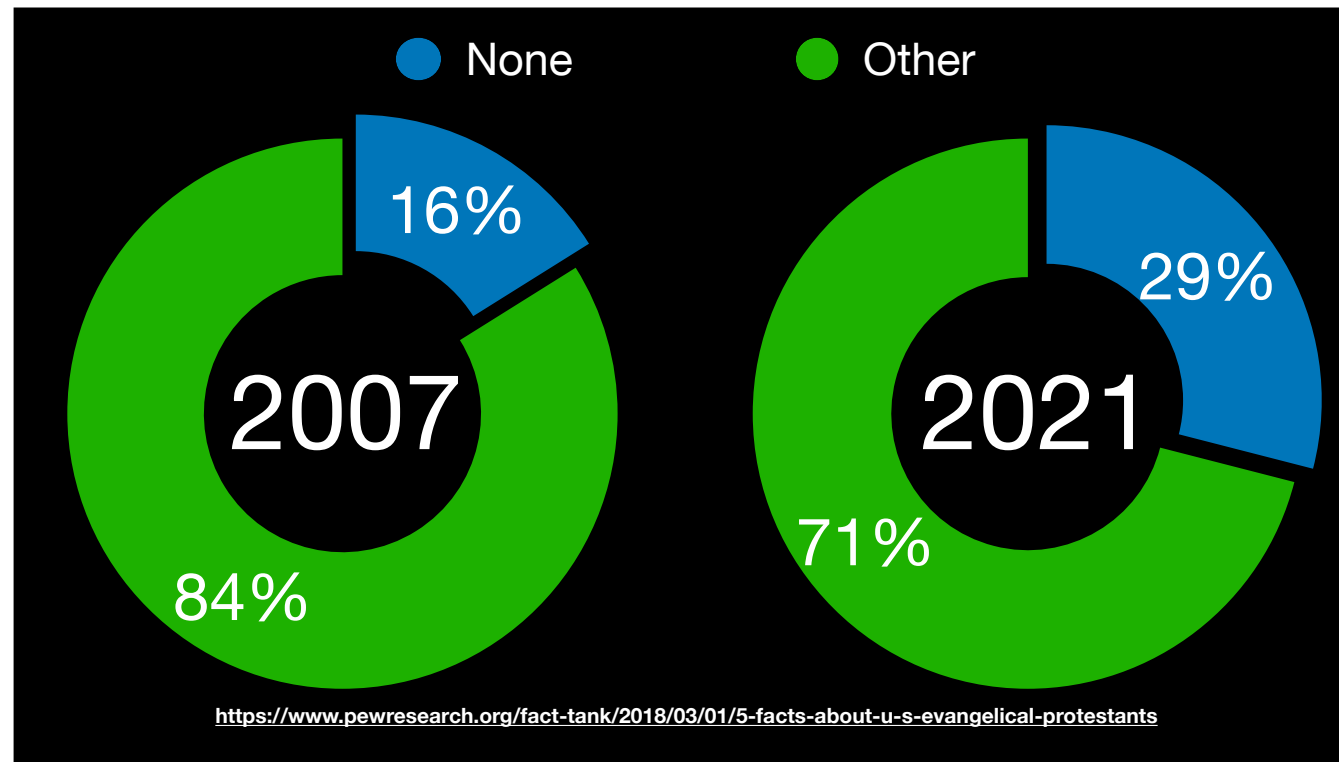


The estimated percentage of change by 2060 for Islam is +70% and for Christianity +34%.  
By 2050—at current rates—Islam will have overtaken Christianity as the largest World Religion.



Notably, “Evangelical protestants” includes all who claim membership or affiliation with a church traditionally considered evangelical. That does not necessarily make them Christians, let alone evangelical Christians.

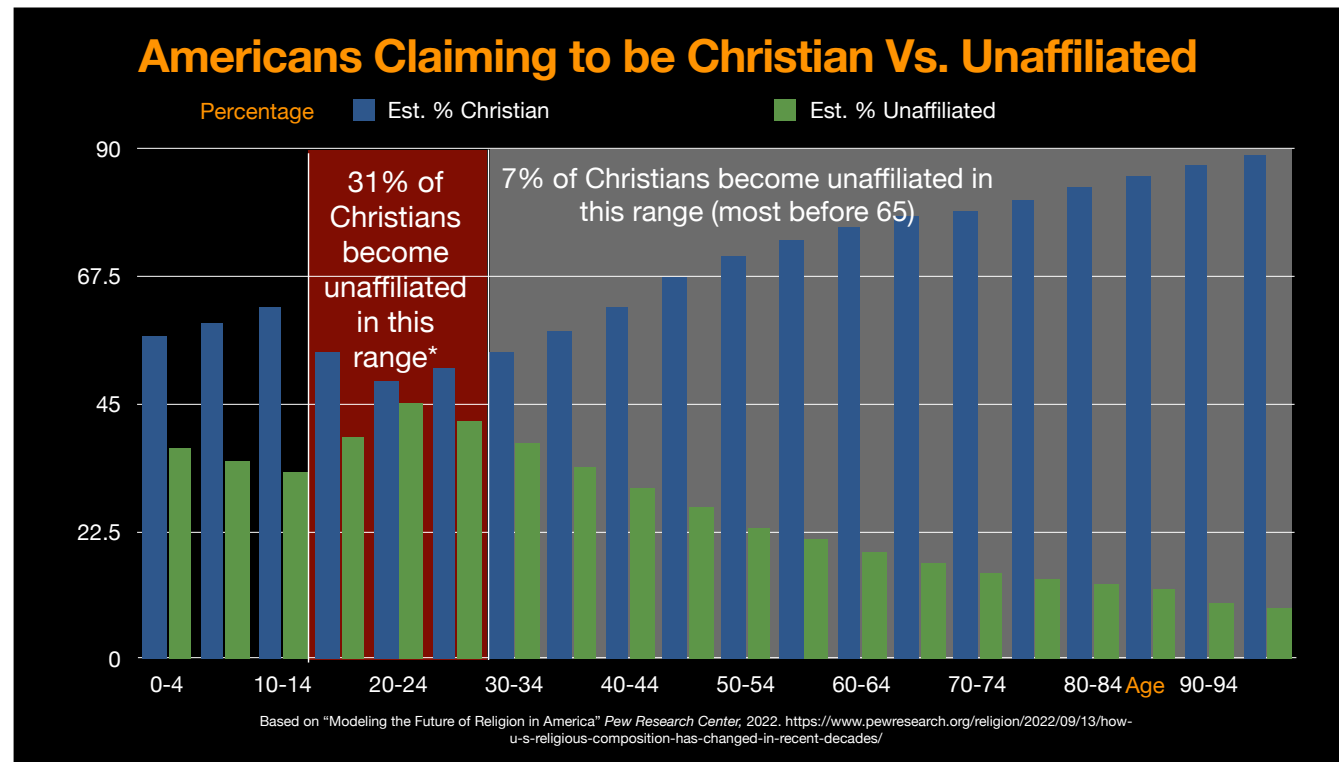
NOTICE that the “Nones” are of higher quantity in the US than in the world at large...



Notice the tremendous growth of the “Nones” in just seven years. That’s 1% per year! — faster than any other demographic. This doesn’t include those who refuse to answer the religious affiliation question—which is about 7%.

**BUT THIS IS NOT THE WHOLE STORY**— recent polls of “evangelicals” also show an alarming drop in biblical literacy and knowledge of basic Christian doctrine—especially in the younger generations.

[https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/pf\\_12-14-21\\_npors\\_0\\_0/](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/pf_12-14-21_npors_0_0/)



The trend toward an increase in “nones” is expected to continue based on the current proportions of those claiming to be Christians examined by age.

Pew reports, “...we estimate that 31% of people raised Christian become unaffiliated between ages 15 to 29, the tumultuous period in which religious switching is concentrated.<sup>2</sup> An additional 7% of people raised Christian become unaffiliated later in life, after the age of 30.”

\* This is somewhat balanced by the fact that “...21% of people who are raised with no religion (i.e., as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular”) become Christian in young adulthood”, ie. In the same range.

**Today the USA is less Christian than it  
has ever been—we can't count on  
people knowing what sin is, or being  
biblically literate in any way.**

**How does that effect how we reach  
out with the Gospel?**

We need to think about how best to reach a culture that is increasingly without biblical knowledge. How do we talk about need of forgiveness to those who have no grasp on what sin is? How do we relate biblical truth to those who know nothing of the Bible? How do we

## A Rough Outline of Acts

- In Jerusalem (1:1-8:1a)
- All Judea and Samaria (8:1b-12:25)
- To the Ends of the Earth (13-28)
  - First Missionary Journey (13-14)
  - The Jerusalem Council (15:1-35)
  - **Second Missionary Journey (15:36-18:22)**
  - Third Missionary Journey (18:23-21:16)
  - Paul in Jerusalem & Cesarea (21:17-26:32)
  - Paul's Voyage to, and stay in, Rome (27-28)





# Acts 17:1-34

## Acts 17 (NIV)

1 When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2 As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. 4 Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. 5 But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. 6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, 7 and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” 8 When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. 9 Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

10 As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. 11 Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. 12 As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. 13 But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. 14 The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. 15 Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. 18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?”



20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” 21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) 22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said:

“People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. 24 “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ 29 “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” 33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

# **Berea**

**Jewish Synagogue**



This Synagogue is 200 years old but many believe it was built on the ruins of the original that Paul spoke in 2000 years ago



## Paul's Message to the Jews at Thessalonica and Berea (Acts 17:1-4)

### 1. Reasoned from the Scriptures (17:2)

#### 1. Proving that Jesus was the Messiah (17:3)

#### 2. Proving that Jesus had to suffer and rise from the Dead (17:3)

The Jews were biblically literate and Paul could use what they knew. Reasoned with them based on the commonality of the Old Testament.

One thing you notice quickly if you read the passages about Paul throughout Acts is that he never wasted a Synagogue. Within days of his conversion he was preaching in the synagogues of Damascus (9:20). After persecution shut him down and he went off to a safer region to learn and grow in his faith, until he was asked to return and join Barnabas at the church in Antioch. After a year, he and Barnabas were set apart by the Lord as missionaries, and immediately the pattern of preaching in synagogues resumes (and continues until Paul's incarceration in Acts 21. [[ Ac 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:2, 10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8]]

## Athens

Acropolis from Mars Hill today

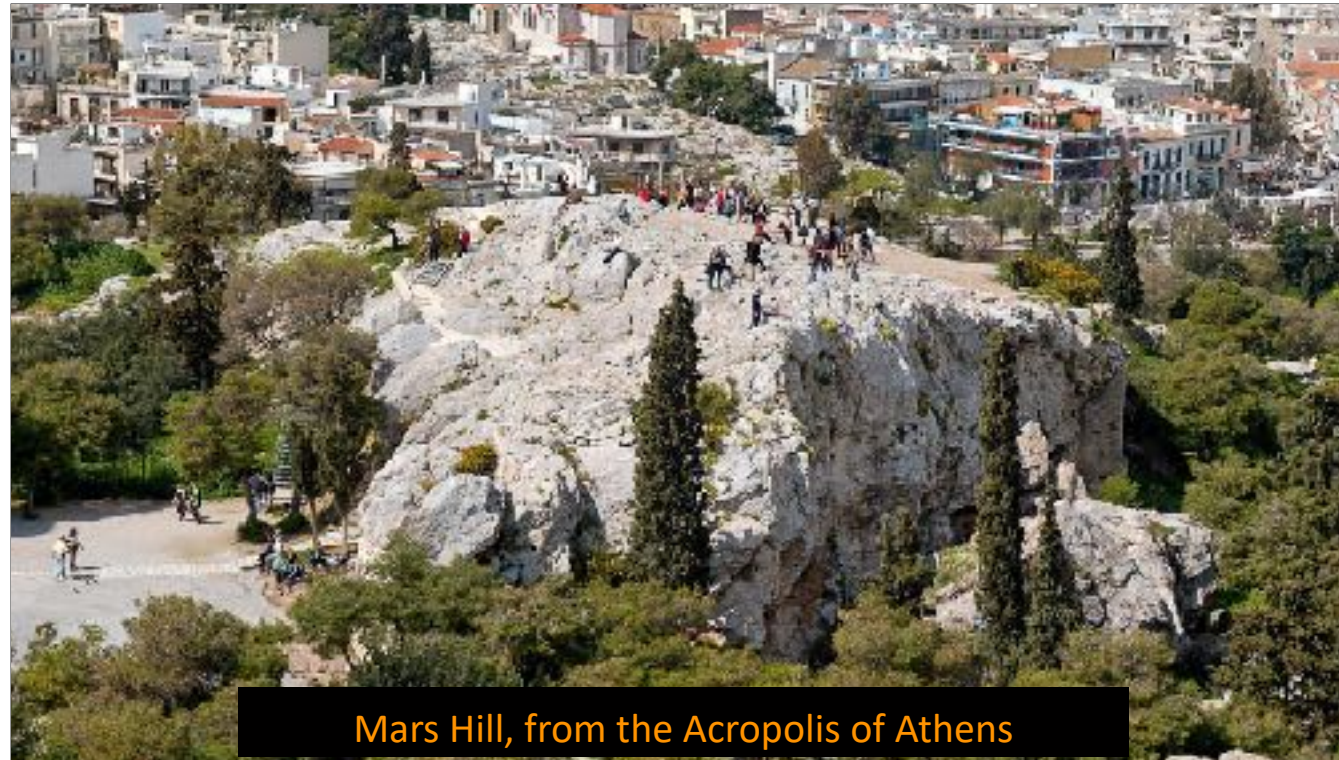


“Athens was also a religious center, where almost every god in existence was worshipped. The pagan writer **Petronius quipped that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man.**” McArthur *Acts 13-28*, 129.

The hill is northwest of the Acropolis in Athens, and overlooks the marketplace where Paul had been “reason[ing] in the marketplace” 17:17

It is here that Socrates was tried and found guilty “refusing to recognize the statutory gods and of corrupting the Athenian youth.” (ca. 400 B.C.) — Owens, *History of Ancient Western Philosophy*, 169.





Mars Hill, from the Acropolis of Athens

Paul had spoken to the Areopagus (Acts 17:19-34), perhaps at Mars Hill, the rocky outcropping pictured here. See chapter 17 for more photographs and explanatory notes about Paul's sermon here.

tb031806377

## Paul's plan of attack at Athens

Engaging in the familiar



1. Preach the Gospel to all who listen.
2. Responding to a question... See 1 Peter 3:15 in context
3. Tying in the familiar context “to an unknown god”—Paul looked first, then spoke—“this is what I am going to proclaim to you.”

## Paul's plan of attack at Athens

Engaging in the familiar



4. Basic “Theology Proper” — Paul gives a lesson on who God is and what he has done.

5. Utilize familiar sources — Paul quotes true statements from pagan philosophers and poets (vs. 28)

6. The message—repentance, judgment, Jesus resurrected

# 1. Being vocal about your Faith

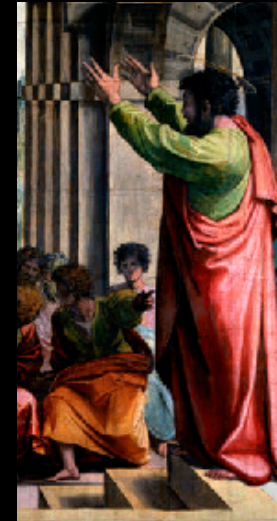




## 1. Being vocal about your faith

Where Paul preached in Athens:

- 17:17 — He reasoned in the Synagogue with Jews and God-fearing Greeks
- 17:17 — He reasoned in the marketplace (ἀγορά)
- 17:18 — Accepted debate from Epicurean and Stoic Philosophers
- 17:19 — Accepted invite/demand to go deeper in explaining his position



Take the opportunities God gives you!

## 2. Responding to a question



## 2. Responding to a question

Being ready to respond

- Acts 17:19–20 (NIV) “Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.”
- 1 Peter 3:15 “...Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...”



## 2. Responding to a question

Being ready to respond

- 1 Peter 3:15 “...Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this **with gentleness and respect...**”
- 17:22-23 Paul compliments their religious zeal and seizes upon their worship of an “unknown god” as a door in order to present THE God who was as yet unknown to them.



### 3. Tying in the familiar: Using the known to explain the unknown



This may be part of what Paul meant when he said “1 Corinthians 9:19–23 (NIV) 19 Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. **I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.** 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

### 3. & 5. Tying in the Familiar

Use the known to explain the unknown

- 17:23 Using the local connection to an “unknown God” to open the door to discussing the One God.
- 17:28 Using familiar voices (poets/philosophers) to bring to light familiar and pertinent truths. This is not the only place Paul does this.



Paul knew the culture well enough to interact with it. He didn't just start preaching, he first walked through the City and observed it.

Paul was well read and was able to bring to bear the works of pagan philosophers and poets his listeners were familiar with. He didn't compromise on truth, but called attention to the truth nested in pagan falsehoods.

## Know your Audience

### Epicurus and Epicureans

Epicurus (c. 341-270 B.C.) studied in the Platonic academy in Athens

- Established his own school in Athens c. 307 B.C., called “the garden” due to where it met.
- Atomist / Materialist — “Everything possible is somewhere actual”
- The good life is attainable only by the good philosopher.
- Lucretius (c. 100-55 B.C.) “Religion is superstition based on fear.

Epicurus taught that “Everything possible is somewhere actual” — Believed in multiple universes and gods, but they were “between the universes”

“Practical wisdom measures pleasures against pains that lead to greater pleasures and rejecting pleasures that lead to greater pains.” — “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die” is a later distortion not taught by Epicurus.

Epicureans (founded by Epicurus c. 341-270 BC) were materialist, made man the measure of all good for himself, and viewed the world as generated by chance (the gods were perfectly happy and dwelt apart, caring neither for man nor the world).

## Know your Audience

### Zeno and Stoics

Zeno of Citium (c. 362-259 B.C.) Studied in Athens under Crates, the Cynic (among others)

- Established his school within the city of Athens c. 320 B.C. on “the painted porch” (or *stoa*)
- Pantheistic—“God is the whole world and the heavens” — rejected classic Greek Pantheon
- The Goal of life is virtue—all else is indifferent.
- World moves in cycles through development and back to a primitive state

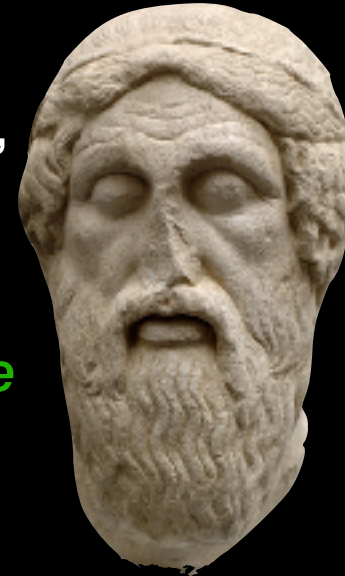
By this time, Stoic philosophy was materialistic (reality belongs only to material things), fatalistic, and pantheistic.

Stoics studied the universe from two standpoints—Mathematics (with some Pythagorean influence) and from a physical standpoint. “From this viewpoint there are two original principles, a passive principle named matter and an active principle called god, mind, fate, Zeus, and many other names. This active principle was conceived as a sort of cosmic fire or fiery breath (*pneuma*). It was called ‘the seminal reason (*logos*) of the cosmos. It is the artificer of everything, producing the basic elements and all the bodies in the universe, pervading them all and governing them all according to reason. In this way the whole cosmos is a living being and the “substance of God is declared by Zeno to be the whole world and the heaven. The earlier and most of the subsequent Stoics taught a periodic return of all things to the primitive state and a repetition of the development process.” —Owens, *A History of Ancient Western Philosophy*, 390.



“They fashioned a tomb for you, O  
holy and high one—  
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts,  
idle bellies!  
But you are not dead; you live and  
abide for ever,  
*For in you we live and move and have  
our being*”

**Epimenides (c. 600 B.C.), *Cretica*  
(Minos speaking of Zeus)**



Epimenides was a Greek Philosopher and Poet from Crete (cf. Titus 1:12 “...one of the Cretans, a prophet of their own has said...”)

See next slide for placement of Paul’s second usage of this poem.

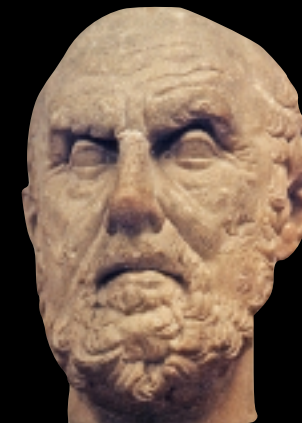
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**Epimenides (c. 600 B.C.), *Cretica*  
(Minos speaking of Zeus)**



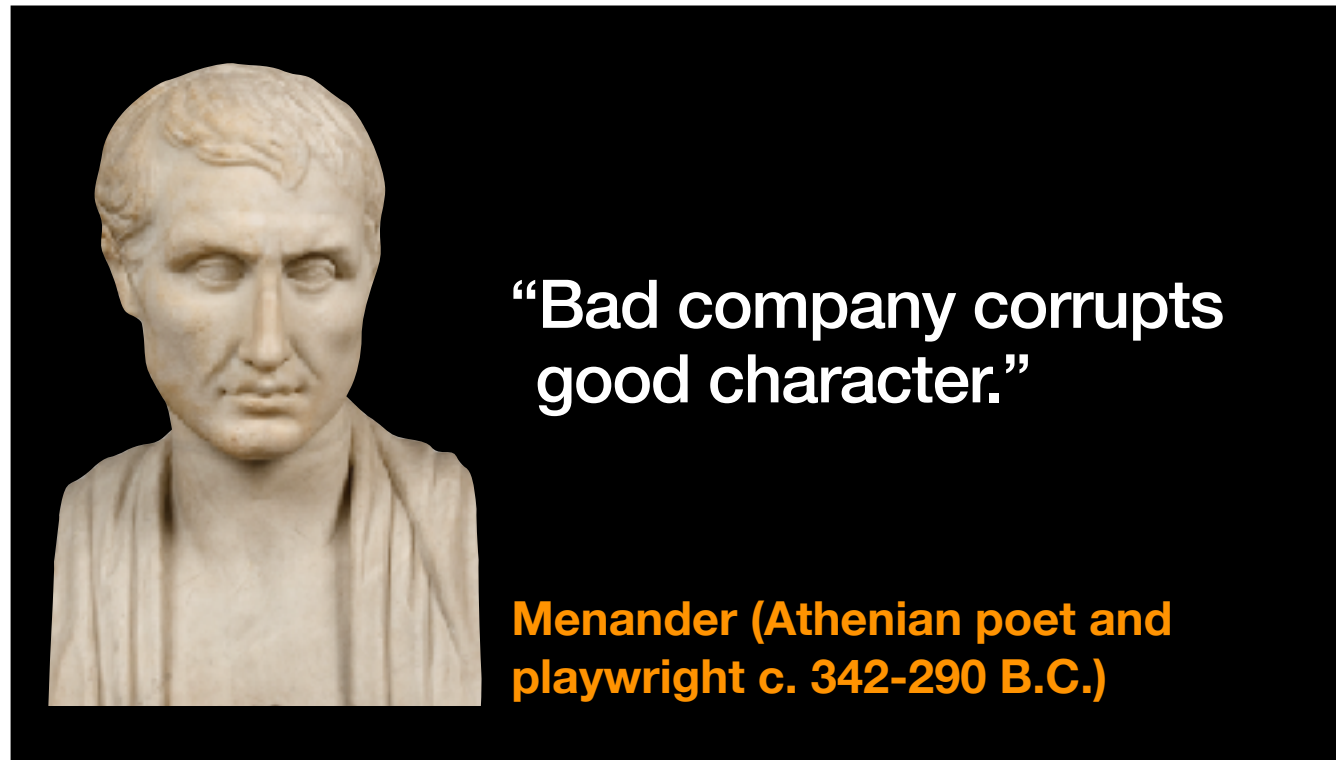
The Second line is quoted by Paul in another place: Titus 1:12, where he refers to Epimenides as a prophet (προφήτης)

“It is with Zeus that every  
one of us in every way  
has to do, *for we are also  
his offspring...*”  
*Phaenomena*



**Aratus (c. 315-240 B.C.)**

Aratus was from Cilicia—Paul’s home area (**Acts 21:39**; 22:3; 9:11—does not mention Cilicia but only Tarsus)  
He studied in Athens and was influenced by Zeno (father of stoicism)



Paul appears to be well read, and quotes others, such as Menander in 1 Corinthians 15:33.

He was a beloved playwright respected by the Romans and over seventy busts of him have been found, though very little of his work has come down to us through the centuries.

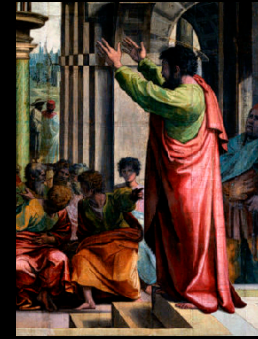
#### 4. Basic core theology: Who is God and what has he done?



## 4. Basic Core theology

Who Is God and what has He done?

- 17:24 — Creator of all
- 17:24 — Lord of heaven and earth
- 17:24-25 — Needs nothing from man (no dwelling, no service)
- 17:25 — Provides for man and sustains him
- 17:26 — Made all mankind from one man, so they might inhabit the whole earth
- 17:26 — Sovereign over nations and national boundaries



17:24 Echoes Steven's speech in Acts 7:48, of which Paul was a hostile witness. There Steven said, "...the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands..."  
Acts 7:48 (NIV)

“What house built by craftsmen could  
enclose the form divine within  
enfolding walls?”

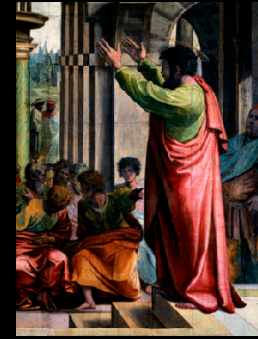
**Euripides (400s BC) *Fragments* 968**

While Paul does not directly quote him, he may be alluding to Euripides—yet another cultural point of contact.

## 4. Basic Core theology

Who Is God and what has He done?

- 17:24 — Creator of all
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- 17:26 — Sovereign over nations and national boundaries



17:26 The Athenians boasted that they had originated from the soil of their Attic homeland and therefore were not like other men.



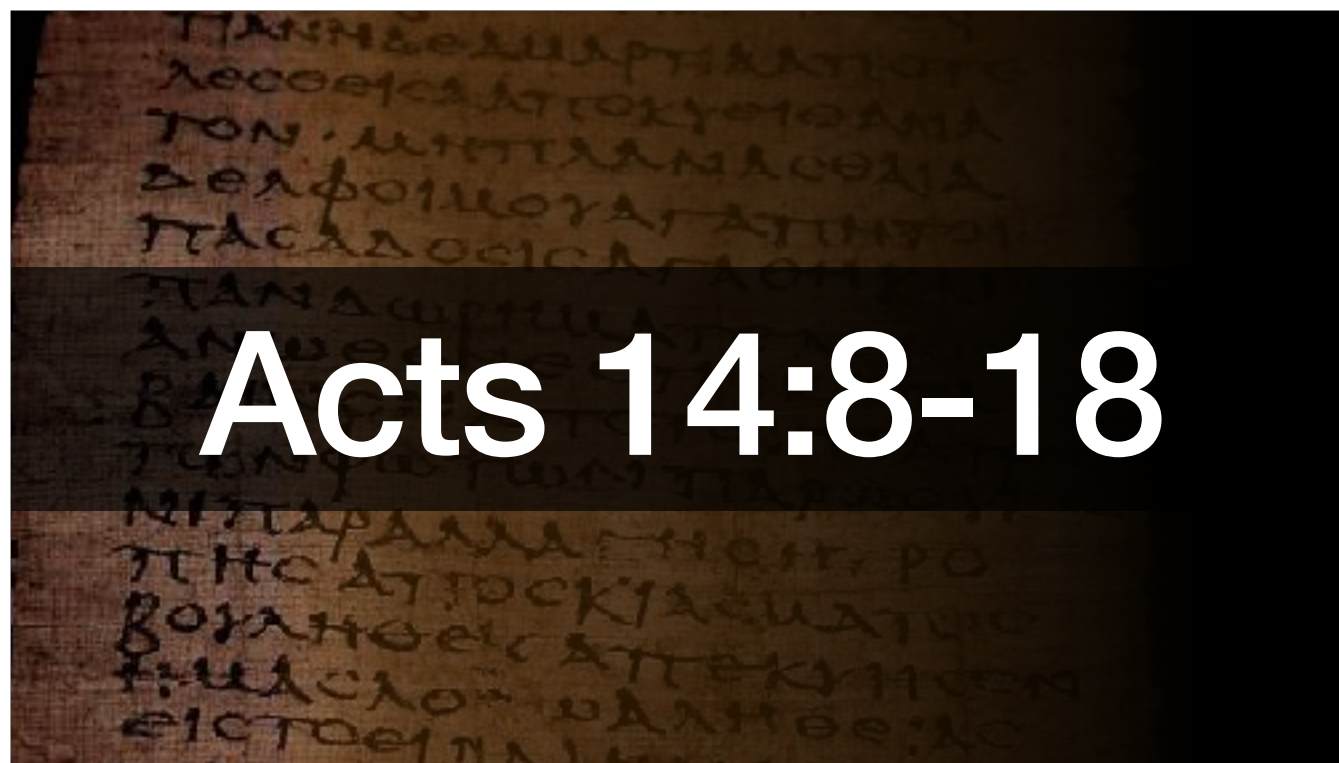
## 4. Basic Core theology

How do we relate to God?



- 17:27 — Did this with an eye toward fellowship — that we might seek Him
- 17:27 — God is not far away from us
- 17:28 — “In him we live and move and have our being”
- 17:28 — “We are his offspring” — Aratus
- 17:29 — God is not man-made — not an idol

17:28 — this is in the sense of being beings created in God's image



#### Acts 14:8–20 (NIV)

8 In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. 9 He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed 10 and called out, “Stand up on your feet!” At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. 11 When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” 12 Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. 13 The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them. 14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: 15 “Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. 16 In the past, he let all nations go their own way. 17 Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” 18 Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. 19 Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. 20 But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

### Previously at Lystra...

“We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to **the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them [17:24]. In the past, he let all nations go their own way [17:30]. Yet he has not left himself without testimony [17:27]: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy [17:25b].”**

Acts 14:15b-17

In this context, Paul had been used of God to heal a man lame from birth, and the Greek's had responded by reacting as if Paul and Barnabas were Zeus (Barnabas) and Hermes (Paul—because he was the chief speaker) 14:12. They were responding to less educated pagans, but there are some commonalities between this and Acts 17.

## 6. The Message: What does God want from Us?



## 6. The Message

What does God want from us?

- 17:30 — In the past God overlooked human ignorance BUT now he commands all people everywhere to repent
- 17:31 — He will judge the world with justice through Christ, His Son
- 17:31 — He has given proof of this by raising him from the dead

Acts 4:12 (NIV) from Peter's sermon.

12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

John 5:21–27 (NIV)

21 For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. 22 Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, 23 that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. 24 “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. 25 Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. 26 For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. 27 And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.

“Greeks and Romans did not believe in a resurrection in the same physical body. They followed a reincarnation model. The philosophers mocked the apostle Paul when he proclaimed a bodily resurrection on Mar's Hill (Acts 17:19, 32). For the Greeks who believed in immortality, salvation involved deliverance from their body, not resurrection in their body.”

Norman L. Geisler, “Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions,” BECA, 650.

“This latter claim is all the more startling given the location of its utterance, for **at the mythical founding of the Areopagus, the god Apollo emphatically stated, “Once the dust drinks down a man’s blood, he is gone, once for all. No rising back, no spell sung over the grave can sing him back.”**”

**S. N. Gundry Et. Al. *Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy*, 15.**

The quote is from the Greek poet Aeschylus and his play Eumenides, written and performed almost five hundred years before Paul arrived in Athens. See Aeschylus, The Oresteia, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1979), 260.

Zondervan,. Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy (Counterpoints: Bible and Theology) (p. 19). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.



# 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

Remember that Paul's speech to the Areopagites is cut down to size. It is quite possible that Paul's presentation of the Gospel was more thorough, though we don't know for sure what more he said. 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 gives us a bigger picture.

Corinth is the next place Paul went after Athens (Acts 18).

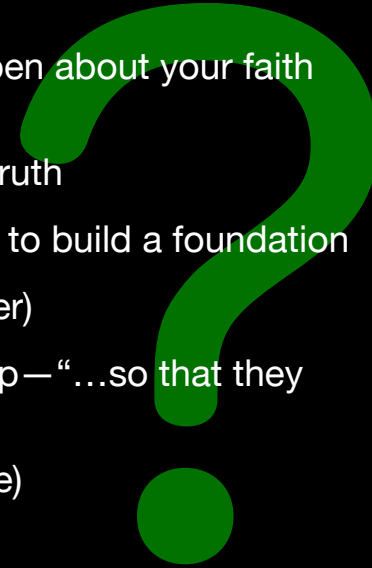
1 Corinthians 15:3-8 (NIV)

3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

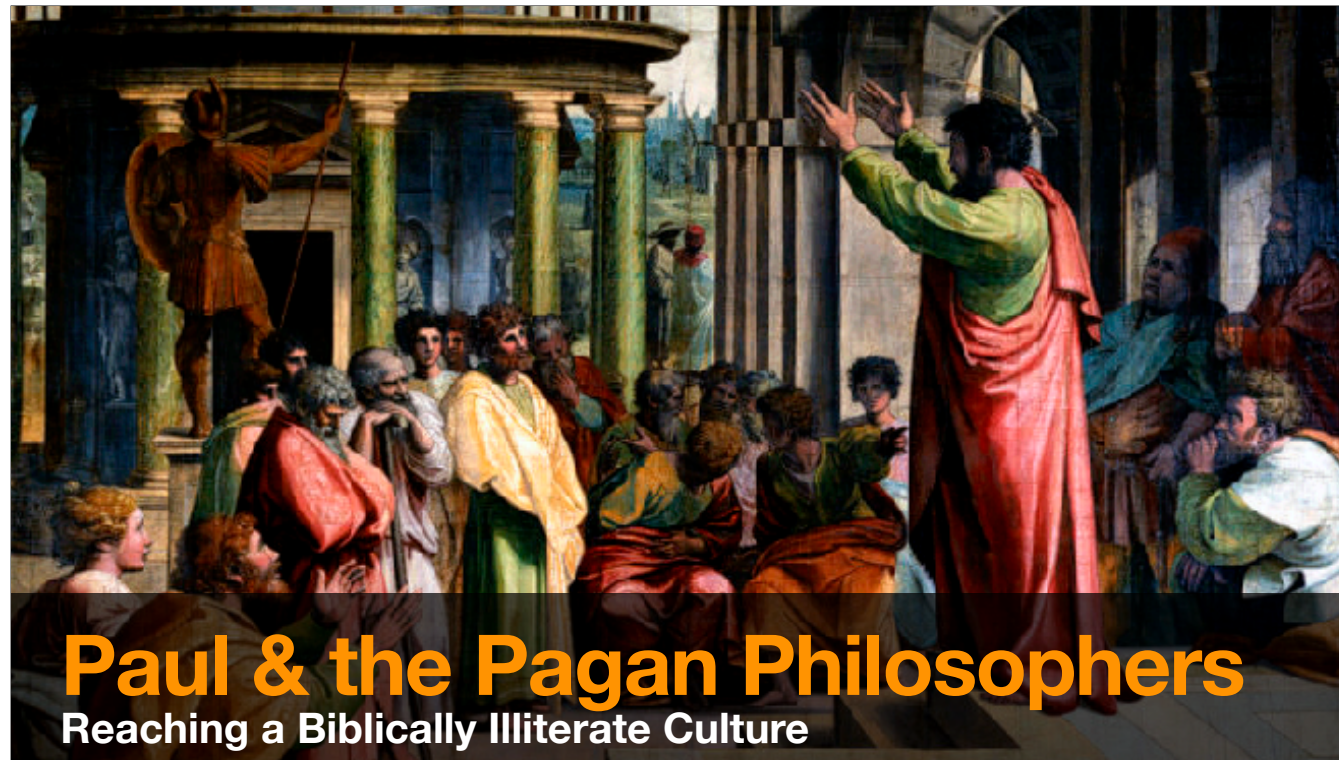


## Application... What about me?

- Be ready when asked (1 Peter 3:15)—if you are open about your faith and living for the Lord, it will happen
- Use the familiar, but don't shy away from biblical truth
- Keep to the core of the Gospel, but you may have to build a foundation
  - Who is God? (creator, director/ruler and sustainer)
  - What is His relation to us? (seeking a relationship—“...so that they would seek him...”)
  - How can I be right with Him? (repent and believe)
  - What proof has he given? (resurrection)







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Reaching a Biblically Illiterate Culture